

HISTORICAL HOUSES - NAMED, M-2

THE BRADFORD HOUSE
in DUXBURY

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by Elizabeth Bradford

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When someone asks me to go to see a museum house, I have the feeling that I shall probably see an impersonal place with beautiful furniture like much I have seen elsewhere, some beautiful china, and probably an architectural feature peculiar to the house. I don't get excited about such a museum as it is the human side of houses which interest me and most museum houses are period pieces not personal homes.

No such place is the Bradford House on Tremont St. in Duxbury. This home spans only about 150 years but was lived in, unchanged, by Bradfords only and is filled with personal mementoes which give it a human flavor. Except for feeling of family, there is nothing truly outstanding about it. From visiting the house we have a chance to learn of typical activities of many Duxbury families. Thanks to long life, late marriages, a prodigious memory, and a family which was drawn to Duxbury as by a lodestone, we can learn all this from one who is only one handshake away from the original owner, I was going to say builder but that is not quite correct, Captain Gershom Bradford.

From the time the house was built until now there have been three Captain Gershom Bradfords, so in speaking of them it has been the custom to start with Captain Gershom, then Uncle Gersh, and finally Gershom, the one from whom we are gleaning much of our information.

We are fortunate that Gershom -- remember he is the one still alive in Washington, who writes so often for the Clipper -- grew up in the House, knew the "Aunts" intimately, loved the place and all it stood for, was -- and is -- a very accurate observer, has an extremely retentive memory, has the collector's interest in old papers, pictures, and records, and best of all can impart his wealth of material in such a way that all ages are fascinated.

Just look at YONDER IS THE SEA and IN WITH THE SEA WIND if you want to confirm what I have just said.

Because the "Aunts" lived in the House from its birth until 1894 when Gershom moved in, because of the New England custom of preserving letters, trinkets, and mementoes, and because Gershom and Ted very generously turned over the House "as is" to the Duxbury Rural and Historical Society, we have been given a window through which to look at Duxbury for about 150 years. In Gershom's words, "The home was a hospitable mecca to the family for about 75 years. The pilgrimages (of cousins) were largely due to the inspiration derived from association with the "Aunts". Their wide knowledge, elevated conversation, and wit, always made a visit to their home a pleasant occasion. When my great-grandmother, and later her daughters, gave a dinner party, the guests sat at an unusual table, all the silver and china had been brought from Europe, selected by the skipper's own good taste. There was no civic enterprise of merit that did not have the support of these ladies; there were few books of importance, published in their day, that did not reach the shelves of their library." As I say this is typical of many houses in Duxbury as several families can attest, since shipping with all its prerequisites and intellectual stimulation was the great activity of the town.

I am only speculating now but I think reasonably. Captain Gershom's father was Gamaliel Bradford, a Colonel in the Continental Army at Valley Forge. Captain Gershom's wife's father was William Hickling whose gallantry at Cherry Valley in New York State was recognized by the gift of a dress sword now hanging in the hallway. Should any travelers of note come to Duxbury it seems more than likely that they would be entertained at the Bradford House, does it not? The oldest of Captain Gershom's daughters, Maria, married Claudius Bradford. His sister married Mr. Thomas of Marshfield at whose house, after making a truly New England deal, Daniel Webster lived so long.

Isn't it likely that at sometime Webster would have dined at the House? Claudius Bradford was a close friend of Wendell Phillips, William Lloyd Garrison, Frederick Douglas, and others sponsoring the abolition cause. To me it seems probable that these men came to the Duxbury House. In the next generation, Uncle Gershom captained a ship for an expedition of Louis Agassiz. When Agassiz traveled through the region, he no doubt had an invitation to come to the House. And in the present generation, Gershom was a very close friend of Captain Bittinger who knew many prominent men in the Navy -- as did Gershom himself. They perhaps stopped by for a visit? All these people reflect the times in which they lived; all were active participants of those times so I believe I am right in saying we can look through the windows of the Bradford House and see the life of Duxbury passing before our eyes.

Houses are material things but then, 1807, as now a house embodies planning, saving, hoping, and waiting, as well as dreaming of the day when the family homestead will stand to face the world with the personality of the inhabitants reflected in it. Our Bradford House is very different from that of either Gamaliel or Daniel, Captain Gershom's two brothers, but all three houses were built within three years of each other. Is the difference a result of the tastes of the brothers or do they reflect differences in the wishes of the wives. Here is an excerpt from a letter of Gamaliel to his wife. "I consider you as my agent to oversee the finishing of our home, and shall promise myself great improvement in it from your taste and discretion. We men, you know, always usurp the province of deep knowledge and judgment. -- I therefore take all the credit of planning, forming the outline and solid parts; but 'tis the peculiar talent of women to polish. You will therefore give the finishing hand to our future dwelling in order that it may please as well as be useful and convenient." Just the other night I was discussing with Gershom the source of fine mouldings in the Bradford House. Like his

brother Gamaliel's, this was built when the Captain was at sea. The builder, Benjamin Bird, lived in Dorchester as did Captain Gershom's wife. Bird was a close friend of Gershom, so was the moulding in the house the result of friendship, of drawings of Captain Gershom of which we have no record, or the choice of Sarah Bradford? One can only speculate. Recently Mrs. Fogg uncovered on the back of one of the pictures at the old house a letter from Captain Gershom to Benjamin Bird with detailed specifications as to the house but no drawings. The house was to be 60 x 40 with an ell. The front door was to be in the center of the house with another door opening out to the back. In this same hall there was to be a staircase. Through clever figuring this was accomplished by having the front door a shade nearer to the parlor than to the sitting room or library as it is now called.

Let's picture Captain Gershom -- a seaman and shipmaster -- constantly sailing on long voyages with much time on board to muse over the family to whom he was devoted. In 1805 his father, Gamaliel died leaving a 90-acre tract to his three sons. One would suppose the three would divide the property equally with 30 acres to each. For some reason this was not done. Gershom's lot was 10 acres -- quite satisfactory to him -- yet one wonders why this division. No doubt like all young fathers, Gershom had dreamed of a home of his own. Now his dreams had come a step nearer to being realized. In his log of the Mercury there is the notation on December 14, 1807, "Last night was at work on the intended house in Duxbury." No doubt on the next stop at home these plans were reviewed and refined with Bird and with Sarah until the complete structure was here. It still is here as planned except for an addition put on in 1893 when the ell had to be repaired. The addition has been made into the modernized apartment of the Pyes and the ell is not quite yet ready for visitors.

What was Captain Gershom like? Draw your own conclusions when I recount

some of the anecdotes about him. First let me quote from some of his letters home. One from Cadiz, 1904; "I supplied a Portugese ship with some bread and fish and he very politely in return sent me some fowls which were very acceptable. What do you think I did with the wishbone, all alone by myself (don't laugh) for I must tell you. The first one, I wished for your safety in your expected trouble. I had the satisfaction to get my wish, which put me in very good humor; -- the second bone, my right hand, for your son and the left hand for a daughter. I will not tell you any more for I know you will laugh at me but I may as well write as think and dream." And another letter this time from New York in 1819 after the House was built and the family living in Duxbury: "Dear wife and children, Seven days gone I left you snug and warm in bed. Not one peeped up to say, 'peace be with you, Father.' So, sad, slow and cold I trudged along nor cast one sad look behind for fear I should return... I dare not look over my shoulder but kept straight down the road until I perceived I was just in the middle of, or between, the four corners and then it being fairly light, I saw the way I was going. So I turned to the larboard hand a little, dropped the small bower for the space of half glass and took some warm coffee with Mr. Winsor and family. The feeling spirits revived, got our small articles in the jolly boat and joined the COWLSTAFF, hove short the anchor chain: made signal for pilot. The pilot came. The anchor is speak, our sails are loosed, the breeze is fair, sweet girls, adieu. If you have opened your peepers, I mean, for it is rather stupid to talk to people asleep." This same delicate sense of humor shows in the entry on the log of a passage to America on Captain Gershom's ship. A flyer advertising it is hanging in the House. Soon after setting forth, the ship sprang a leak which forced a return to port. On setting sail again the ship once again sprang a leak which this time required the crew to man the pumps. It became so bad that even the passengers had to take their turns at the pumps.

In the log Captain Gershom writes "The passengers are worried and well they should be." The ship made a safe passage nevertheless and all arrived with nothing but adventures to tell their descendants.

Two legends come down of Captain Gershom. A neighbor cut down a tree on the Bradford property. "Surely, you will protest," said his friends. "No," said Gershom, "for if he made a mistake, he should be excused and if he did it deliberately, he probably needed the wood more than I need the tree." Another legend. Gershom, like so many people, had a genuine fear of dogs. A neighbor had one which barked furiously when he saw Gershom. One Sunday during the church service the dog wandered into church and located his master sitting in the pew in front of Gershom. Embarrassed the master abruptly shut the pew door in the dog's face. Mystified, the dog turned. With no thought of himself, Gershom quietly opened his pew door and in walked the frightening animal to sleep contentedly at Gershom's feet. From then on, according to legend, the dog never barked when he saw Gershom! So Gershom was a genial, gentle, home-loving man who took adversity in his stride yet acted fearlessly and firmly when occasion demanded. Had it not been so, there is plenty of chance that he would not have come off victor in two sea fights of which there are pictures in the House.

The first picture shows a fight when he was a first mate for his brother Gamaliel on the INDUSTRY and fought off four feluccas. During the skirmish, Gamaliel was wounded and as a result had to have his leg amputated. Gershom thereby became Captain of the ship. The fight can be seen pictured on a Liverpool pitcher in the Old House and also reproduced in watercolor by a descendant, Laurence Bradford. A second fight is shown in a painting by Corse shwoing the MARY fighting off three French privateers. Of this encounter, Gamaliel writes, "if you could the MARY's sails and rigging and the shot that yet stick about the hull you might think our heads were in some danger."

Of the same fight again. "Most lovely, virtuous and best of thy sex -- As there is an opportunity that presents some chance of conveyance to friends that are so dear to us as those at Boston and Duxbury, tho' prospect of its coming to hand is but small, yet I write because it is a pleasure to do so. After a passage of 35 days and some difficulty, we arrived safe in port. But I must tell you that your fish was in great danger of the Frenchmen the day before we got into port and you must tell N.W. that his was in the same way, but it was our good fortune to escape ourselves and fish too."

Gershom was extremely partisan in politics and outspoken about it. He admired President Harrison very much and at one time he made a picture of Harrison and put it up by the roadside. This political billboard, as we might now call it, so frightened the horses of Duxbury that it had to be removed. Gershom then made a large sign naming the street Harrison Street.

Going back to the current Gershom's remark that guests of the Bradford House sat down to an unusual table which reflected the fine taste of Captain Gershom, let me mention the old French clock. On one voyage, the Captain bought it in France as the bill of sale testifies. Translating the French Revolutionary date, it seems to be May 1805. With the sale, is a guarantee that the clock will run for a year flawlessly. It had run for over 150 and was still running when handed over the Historical Society. It has had more travels from France to Duxbury in a sailing ship. When the Aunts died, the executors felt the clock should go to an old and devoted friend. Following her death, it went to the Knapps in Plymouth, and following the break up of that household it went to Washington to live with the current Gershom. He returned it to the Old House where he remembers distinctly seeing it on the Library mantelpiece. It doesn't fit there! Now I have mentioned before that Gershom is a very accurate observer and has a very retentive memory both visual and auditory. How come the clock will not fit where Gershom remembers it was?

Having had a similar clock with globe and stand, which during the course of time was put under a different globe, it occurs to me that a similar experience might come to this clock. Without the present stand but under the present globe the clock fits nicely on the library mantelpiece!

Another sample of Captain Gershom's taste is the barely visible marble lion looking out of an upstairs window over the front door. Perhaps in more law-abiding times this may be restored to its former position as one of the guardians on the gate-post on one side of a wicket gate through which you passed to enter the yard and house. This was brought home from Italy as one of a pair to serve this purpose. One of the pair was destroyed years ago and then the other was placed in safety over the front door. Now Mr. Lion must do his duty of guardian from inside.

Also brought from Italy are eleven blocks of lava cut approximately 16 inches to a side from Mt. Etna. There is little doubt that these came home as ballast when the cargoes homeward bound from Sicily were light. Now these serve as paving stones to the front door.

Let's move from genial, loving Captain Gershom to his grandson Uncle Gershom. Like his great-uncle, he served enthusiastically as captain of many ships in the U.S. Coast and Geodetic Survey. Like his brother Laurence and his forbears, Gershom had most of his education in the School of Hard Knocks although for a period he was at Deerfield Academy. At sixteen a friend of the family, Mr. White, assured a berth for him on the OCEAN PEARL which circumnavigated the globe. He did not grow up in Duxbury, as his father, the Reverend Claudius, secured parishes in and about Massachusetts before being finally "Discovered" by Horace Mann and settling down as professor of languages at Antioch in Ohio. Duxbury is far closer to port than Yellow Springs so became a frequent port-of-call for Gershom, particularly after he met Minnie Winsor of Duxbury in California when she was sailing on the CONTINENTAL with her father, Charles Winsor. Both

Gershom and his brother Laurence were of an age and of temperments to take active parts in the Civil War -- at sea: Gershom as Navigator on the BIB and Laurence on the Gunboat SHOKOKON and the HARCOURT. Both men served with distinction throughout the War.

The manner of launching two boys from inland Massachusetts on a career at sea is an interesting one. Reverend Claudius Bradford as has been said was an ardent abolitionist which cost him parishes and therefore his means of livelihood until he found a berth at Antioch. Claudius and his wife, Maria, daughter of Captain Gershom, were asked to take into their family a Kanaka boy who was the ward of a Captain White. Seeing many difficulties in the situation, the Bradfords at first refused but then changed their minds and took the boy, raising him like their own. It turned out that Captain White was the boy's father due to a voyage to Hawaii in his early days. He wanted a good education for his son but not under his roof. When Will was about 16, his father decided it was time for him to go to sea. Returning to the Bradford's between voyages, his sea tales stirred Gershom's imagination to such an extent that his mother wrote "Gershom is crazy to go to sea and he usually gets his way." Captain White saw to it that Gershom did get what he wanted by providing a berth on the OCEAN PEARL. Some four years later Captain White provided a berth before the mast for Laurence. In 1859, both boys were in California working in the lumber industry. But the War put them both back to sea.

Laurence, named for his uncle Laurence who was lost at sea in the CUPID along with others voyaging to fight for Greek Independence, furthered his education by two years "sitting in" at M.I.T. which enabled him to become an engineer. This life took him from Boston to Fort Benton on the Upper Missouri by way of San Diego, and Mexico. Then he settled back in Massachusetts with the Metropolitan Sewage Commission. In 1894, he moved from his great-uncle Daniel's house to the Old House, the "Aunts" having died. Laurence like the other

sea-faring Bradfords was an excellent boatman and clung to the water, yet he disliked the sea as a profession.

This is evident in his reaction to his son Gershom's decision to go to sea as a fisherman. Son Gershom, upon graduating from Partridge Academy in Duxbury went to work for a lumber company. A lot of the time was naturally spent on the wharf where sea-captains were about. After a couple of years of this one captain impatiently said to Gershom, "Are you going to stay here all your life? Get out in a fisherman and if you are any good I'll make you a skipper." This started Gershom off romancing but did not please his parents much. Lumbering did not satisfy the sea-urge that was sure. To quote Gershom, "All suggestions my folks offered were brushed unappreciatively aside. One night Father lost patience. 'Well, what do you want to do?' 'I want to be a fisherman.' I can still see their distress. 'So you want to go to sea,' said Father sadly. 'Very well,' he continued, 'but not fishing. The only way to go is to be properly trained and start right.' The clouds over the family circle cleared. Father went to Boston the next day, consulted with his nautical friends, and returned with printed matter and application blanks for entrance in the school-ship ENTERPRISE." So Gershom was launched. He worked for the Coast and Geodetic Survey as had his Uncle Gershom and in the Hydrographic Office in Washington and I believe his happiest years were as Navigation on the New York Schoolship NEWPORT or as Instructor in the Shipping Board Naval School based in Boston, or after retirement when he voluntarily trained those interested men who wanted to become navigator mates and did not have the necessary education. Eighty mates now have their papers as a result of his war work during World War II. Gershom once told me of a man who was to distinguish himself later in his navy career and who owed his entry into the Merchant Marine because of Gershom's human understanding. There were many applicants for only two berths so Gershom

had to decide how to choose among those qualified the few who would make the best use of their training in the merchant marine. He decided to ask each why he wanted to join and be guided by their reasons. Most of the answers were vague and general, but one small man, both under stature and underweight looked Gershom straight in the eye and said he wanted to become Captain of a ship. This was the ideal and hoped for answer, so disregarding the physical shortcomings, this man was chosen and, to finish the story, he made good with distinction as I have said.

Laurence Bradford's other son, Edward, whom those in Duxbury knew as Ted, was the only one of this seafaring line to go to college and graduate. He went to Princeton and then the Harvard Law School and practiced law in Providence for 50 years. Then at the age of 70 he started traveling and went six times to Europe by ship. Once there he travelled by train, bus, or foot from Galway Bay to Check Point Charley and from Oslo to Palermo. I say by foot and I mean it. He figured that he must have walked about 1000 miles of the way.

It is the generosity of these two brothers and their appreciation of the value of what the House represents that provides us with the charming Bradford House museum and its windows into Duxbury life from 1807-1968.

In keeping with those 19th Century times, this account has pretty well reviewed the family from Gershom to Gershom overlooking almost completely the distaff side. In these days of Women's Lib can we tolerate such action? As far as I can see it was the women of yore who stimulated the ambitions of their children, taught them the rudiments of the three R's and cultivated their intellectual tastes. Let's not overlook them.

Sarah Bradford, Captain Gershom's wife, and his three daughters carried on the family ideals of service to the community by taking an active part in every civic enterprise. They were independent thinkers and might well --

according to their great nephew -- have been suffragettes if that idea had developed in their day. The intellectual atmosphere of the house is well evidenced by the library filled with the important books of their day, by Lucia's poetry, by the charming little decorations on the parlor mantelpiece of handpainted bouquets, by Elizabeth's botanical collection which is being refreshed I believe, and will be displayed in the House, and by their choice of paintings displayed largely in the hallway and upstairs. There is nothing second rate though perhaps sentimental in the eyes of some. One is a little picture of Colonial Gamaliel, Captain Gershom's father painted by his Revolutionary campmate Kosciusko.

Charlotte, the 4th daughter, may have had less intellectual interests than her sisters, I do not know, but she demonstrated a true devotion to the needs of her fellow-men in her fine work as nurse with the Sanitary Commission in the Civil War serving right on the fields and in the hospital ships and then after the war as Matron in the Soldier Home in Washington. I am sure she would have been the first to go to a sick neighbor with a bowl of broth or with practical help when a mother was taken sick or laid low by an accident.

Marie, the only one of the four to marry, also had very varied experiences moving from place to place within Massachusetts with her clergyman husband, Claudius and finally settling down in Ohio. They were active abolitionists as I have mentioned and quite possibly obtained an autographed photograph of John Brown whom they greatly admired and counted among their friends. She saw to it that her daughter, Lucia, obtained sufficient education and erudition to be able to run a school in Plymouth with her husband Frederick Knapp after they had served on the Sanitary Commission during the War.

More than this on the distaff side, I have not been able to unearth, but combining it with what we know of the masculine portion of those who left

their imprint on the House, I truly feel that we can look through its windows to a Duxbury where people grew up peace-loving, public-spirited, thinking more of the common weal than of their own aggrandizement, each doing his share of good in the community -- the true ideal of American Democracy.